

## Revelation 21:9-14, 21-27 – The City of God – Easter 6 – May 22, 2022

+In Nomine Iesu+

When people talk about heaven—or what happens when we die—they often have St. Peter standing at the pearly gates. Mansions. Streets of gold. Puffy clouds. Fat cherubs.

There is this story about a wealthy man who died and went to heaven. And, as the story goes, he was met at the pearly gates by St. Peter, who led him down the golden streets. And they passed amazing mansion after amazing mansion until they came to the very end of the street. St. Peter stopped the rich man in front of a little tiny shack, barely standing.

And St. Peter told him that this was his place. The rich man objected. “Why do I get this ugly little thing when there are so many mansions I could live in?” St. Peter replied, “We did the best we could with what you gave.”

These kinds of jokes—here with a moralistic jab about offerings—are often where we start. But what does all of this really mean? The city of God. Pearly gates. Streets of gold. As we read this passage from Revelation 21, let’s go a little deeper. Let’s be a little more sophisticated about our understanding of eternity. Really, this is one of the most serious conversations that we can ever have.

And thus, this is going to be a different kind of sermon. We are dealing with Revelation, after all, which is a different kind of book. Like last week, there is plenty here in John’s writing that is obscure. There is plenty with which to wrestle. This is not the easiest book to interpret.

And so, we arrive at the last and perhaps the greatest image of the new creation—of resurrection—of total renewal—in the whole Bible. This scene, set out in Revelation 21-22, needs some context. One must read and at least marginally understand the rest of Revelation first.

We want to rightly interpret the imagery. And here, it may be best to begin with the numbers. As the New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven, the number twelve is all over the place. There are twelve gates. The names of the twelve tribes of Israel are inscribed on the gates. And there are twelve foundations. And the names of the apostles are inscribed on these foundations.

We didn’t hear all of the reading. But in the missing verses, we would also see walls 144 cubits thick—twelve times twelve. We see the city being 12,000 stadia. And 12,000 stadia are equivalent to 1,380 miles. But then we hear that the New Jerusalem is foursquare in length and width. But then it also has the same height. That’s right. The New Jerusalem is 1,380 miles long and wide *and high*. And we quickly figure out that the image is symbolic.

Twelve is the number of God’s people. Jesus knew what He was doing when He chose Twelve Disciples. He knew that the family of Jacob—who became Israel—had twelve sons—twelve tribes. And so, with the choosing of Twelve Disciples, Jesus is the new Israel. And it is His spiritual descendants that will inherit the New Jerusalem—which is the Bride—the church. That is what is being depicted. A people rather than a place, per se.

And, really, all the gold and the shape of this city cause one to remember the Holy of Holies in the temple. A perfect cube marked the holy place of God’s dwelling with His people. The place of the Ark of the Covenant was where God dwelt most closely with His

people. The Holy of Holies was 20 cubits by 20 cubits by 20 cubits. Quite small. But a perfect cube.

As we heard in Revelation 21:3 last week, our promise is for God to be with His people in eternity. That's what the temple was all about. It was the renewal of the intimacy that God had with humanity in the Garden of Eden before the fall into sin. And the temple served as a foretaste of the world to come in Christ. And so, John says, "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.'"

So this isn't so much describing streets of gold and really thick—and even higher walls in the New Jerusalem. It is a picture of embodied fellowship. *Koinonia*, in the New Testament. Christ and the Church. God with His people. This is our hope—not so much to be with loved ones who have gone before—as nice as that might be—granted they died in the faith. To be with Christ is our highest good.

And we notice right away how drastically different this is from all those would-be Christian stories that has the Christian going off to heaven in the clouds—as a soul—for all eternity. We don't live forever in the spiritual realm.

In the end, it is not that we will go to heaven—but that heaven comes to earth. And indeed, it is the church itself—this New Jerusalem—that comes down to earth as well. This is the final answer to the Lord's Prayer—that God's Kingdom will come to earth just as it is reigns in heaven.

It is God's promise in Ephesians 1. Reading from verse seven, Paul says, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

And this helps us to make sense of the lack of a temple in the new creation. At the end of Revelation 21, John looks inside to observe life in the eternal city. And he makes three statements, each of which is in negative terms. Theologians take this same approach in defining the most essential attributes of God. We define God by saying what He is not. This is called *apophatic theology*—if you care about such things.

We describe the extent of God's essence by saying that He is infinite—He is not finite. We describe His life by saying He is immortal—He is not mortal. God is immutable—He does not change in His essence. In a similar way, John approaches a future glory that we cannot fully imagine. And so he defines eternity by stating what we cannot find in it.

Paul in 1 Corinthians 2, drawing on Isaiah 64, uses a similar approach. He states, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him."

I mentioned the first negative statement already. There is no temple in the New Jerusalem. And this is not because worship has ceased. Remember that the heavenly picture that we get throughout Revelation is full of song and reverence and praise.

Regular worship will be part of the new creation. We will spend much of eternity doing what we are doing today. But this absence of a physical temple is because “its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.”

In eternity, God will fill the dwelling of His people in such a way that He is met and known everywhere. The radiance of His glory and majesty—in all its fullness—fills all things. No sanctuary is needed for fellowship with God. This relationship will be direct and immediate. God tabernacles with His people. God is everywhere present to His people. We will be constantly in His presence.

And the fact that there are no worship buildings in the New Jerusalem shows us how to think of things now. Christians rightly invest in worship in physical ways. The building matters. And where we worship should stimulate thoughts of the majesty that is to come. Beautiful buildings, worship services rich in God’s Word, and lovely sacred music play a valuable role in this sense. They point us forward as we anticipate the reality that will soon replace them all. We look forward to when all will give way into the reality of God with us.

But, not only is the city of God without a temple, it also lacks physical lights. “And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there.”

The light of God’s glory fills the New Jerusalem. We are reminded here of the creation story in Genesis one as light is created before the sun, moon, and stars. Many have criticized this account and for this reason. How can light exist without the sun? But the Bible insists that God is the source of light. Jesus Himself says that He is the light of the world. As the New Jerusalem comes, God’s complete presence among His people satisfies the purposes for the sun, moon, and stars—light, heat, sight, direction. God’s glory is all that we need.

Finally, John describes the city of God as a city without sin. “Nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.” We saw hints of this in last week’s reading. Remember, we talked about God’s intention to eliminate mourning, crying, pain, tears, and death. But there is an additional line there at the beginning of the chapter that is quite interesting.

In verse one, we hear, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.” The sea has been negated in the new creation along with sin. What are we to make of this?

To understand this figure of speech, we must think of the sea as John did. Remember that he is exiled on the Island of Patmos. The sea separates him from freedom and friends and the church. In addition, one of the beasts arose out of the sea. The beasts represented human opposition to all that God was doing in the world. The sea represented chaos, disorder, anarchy. Sheol was at the bottom of the sea. It was the place of the leviathan. The dragon himself is home in the sea. In the picture of the vanishing sea, John saw the waters of sin and separation and despair disappear before him. He sees the dawning of a day when there will be no more burdens due to sin.

So, let’s take the promises of a New Jerusalem seriously. This is our great hope—the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come. And let’s leave behind false ideas

about what is to come. In the New Jerusalem, the blessings are communicated not only in what is present—the dwelling place of God and the church—in Old and New Testament twelves. But also in what is no longer present—no temple, no sun or moon, no sin. As Paul says, “The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” The age in which we live will give way to eternal glory, as Christ returns.

And let’s be ready for that day—meeting it in faith and faithfulness. John urges us to seek the only way of entry into that glorious city to come—through the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The gate is narrow. The way is hard. But, as we hear in the next chapter, “Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.” May that blessing be ours through faith in Jesus Christ. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*